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ABSTRACT

Native language acquisition is a natural and non-natural stage-by-stage process. The natural first stage is development of speech and listening skills. In this stage, competency is gained in the home environment. The next, non-natural stage is development of literacy, a cultural skill taught in school. Since oral-aural native language development is gained at home, schools do not generally focus on it, but concentrate on development in the second stage. When the two stages are considered in relation to Thomas G. Sticht's Law about native language acquisition, which states that reading skill can not exceed listening skill, it is logical to assume that without proper aural-oral development, literacy skills can never be properly developed. These stages of native language acquisition must also apply to foreign language learning. They are especially important if Sticht's Law is considered, because the home environment does not support development of the needed aural-oral stage in the second language. Therefore, for foreign languages, schools must take the place of the home environment and assure that learners are competent in the first stage before proceeding to teach the skills of the second stage. (MSE)

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Following Native Language Acquisition

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This paper, Following Native Language Acquisition, was presented at the 23rd Annual Jalt International Conference at Hamamatsu, Japan on October 11, 1997.

Abstract

In this paper, the author discusses the implications that the stages of native language acquisition and Thomas Sticht's Law have for foreign language learning.

Native language acquisition in human beings has a natural and nonnatural, stage-by-stage process. The natural, first stage found in all human groups is oral-aural development—speaking and listening. Competency at this stage is gained in the home environment, before entering school. The next stage is the nonnatural process of literacy—reading and writing. Literacy is not universal to all human groups and is a cultural skill taught in school. Since the oral-aural development of one's native language is naturally gained in the home environment, schools do not focus on this stage of development, but emphasize teaching the skills for the nonnatural, second stage, which is the literacy stage.

When these two stages are considered along with Sticht's Law about native language acquisition, which states reading skill cannot exceed listening skill, it's logical to assume that without the proper oral-aural development of the first stage, the second stage can never be successfully developed (Hirsch, 1996, 147-150).

These stages of native language acquisition must also apply to foreign language learning. They are especially important if Sticht's Law is considered because the home environment does not support the development of the foreign language's needed oral-aural stage. If the oral-aural stage is neglected, successful language acquisition can never be obtained in either one's native language or any second language. Therefore, for foreign languages, schools must take the place of the home environment and make sure that learners are competent at the first stage before proceeding on to teaching the skills for the literacy stage of development of the second stage.

Introduction

In this paper, the importance that natural and nonnatural, the two stages of native language acquisition have for second language learning will be discussed.

For native language acquisition the first stage, the natural stage, is found in all human groups. This is the oral-aural development stage — better known as speaking and listening. Competency at this stage is gained by children in the home environment, before entering school.

The second stage is the nonnatural process of literacy — reading and writing. Literacy is not universal to all human groups and is a cultural skill taught in school. Since the oral-aural development of a native language is naturally gained in the home environment, schools do not focus on this natural, first stage of development, but focus on teaching the skills for the nonnatural, literacy stage.

In native language acquisition, these two stages always follow in the proper sequence. Native speakers must be competent in the natural stage before progressing on to the nonnatural stage. In reading research there are three theoretical positions that support this: "1. Oral language skills develop to a fairly high level prior to the development of written language skills. 2. Oral and written languages share much the same lexicon (vocabulary) and syntax (grammar). 3. Beginning readers draw upon their knowledge of oral language in learning to read." (Sticht, Reading for Working, pp. 307-308)

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It is not easy or natural to gain fluency in one's native language by ignoring the first stage of language acquisition and beginning at the nonnatural stage. This doesn't mean that it is impossible to gain fluency in a second language by first learning the nonnatural stage and then proceeding on to the natural stage, but there seems to be no benefit and many disadvantages for foreign language learners in proceeding in this unnatural sequence.

If we examine the Japanese schools systems approach, it becomes evident that Japanese school children are being taught English in this unnatural, backwards sequence where they are taught to read and write, but are not taught the oral-aural first stage skills that are necessary to successfully proceed on to the second stage. It must be noted here that even with this backwards approach a few motivated and gifted Japanese students do become proficient in English. In general, though, on viewing the results of this approach, where after six years of English as a foreign language, very few students can speak English with any proficiency. It is easy to see that this reverse approach makes it extremely difficult for foreign language learners to achieve native language fluency. Reversing the natural order of the stages is just not the way native language acquisition works. Native language acquisition dictates that the natural stage is first followed by the nonnatural stage.

Some excellent work that Thomas G. Sticht has done with native language learners in the area of reading and listening shows that the lack of competency in the first stage of native language acquisition severely hinders progress in the next stage. Basically what Sticht writes is that reading skill cannot exceed listening skill. This will be taken up in more detail later in this paper. Also, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., author of the very famous and controversial book Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know, states in his new book, The Schools We Need, that without the proper first stage, oral-aural development, the literacy stage can never be successfully developed (Hirsch, 1996, 147-150). Thus, we can see begin to see the importance that the natural first stage must be properly developed first before the nonnatural, second stage can be.

Sticht's Work and the Japanese Approach

If we can safely make the assumption that these stages in the proper order are necessary for native language acquisition, then it is not hard to see that these stages must also be important in the learning of foreign languages. But again looking at how the Japanese educational system approaches teaching English as a foreign language, it is easy to see that children's English learning here is focused on the nonnatural, second stage of literacy long before there is any kind of competency in the natural, oral-aural, first stage. In Japan, the educational system emphasizes reading, grammar exercises and uses testing of these literary skills as a sort of IQ test to judge students for entry into each level in the educational hierarchy from junior high school on.

Beginning learners of English as a foreign language are taught reading, mostly by the translation method, and do grammar exercises. It is easy to see that Japanese schools are teaching almost exclusively at the nonnatural stage of language acquisition. The natural stage, which is where the beginning learning should be concentrated, is almost completely ignored. There is no English home environment where students can gain competency in the oral-aural stage and many students do not even have any classes where they are taught this first stage until they enter university. Thus, this backwards approach is surely causing many of the problems that Japanese students are having with their second language and is probably one of the main reasons that students rarely if ever achieve fluency in English.

One of the fallacies in the Japanese system is the belief that although students may not be able to communicate using a foreign language, they are very competent in reading and writing in the language. If this were true, it would be going against the natural order of language acquisition and would have been proven in Sticht's research with native language reading and listening skills or in E.J. Gibson and H. Levin's work, which will be discussed later.

Sticht's work on the relationships between oral and written language skills shows the need for competency in the natural stage before progressing on to the nonnatural stage. In his paper, titled "Listening and Reading" he states that written language development draws on competence in oral language. He goes on to state that if a student is not good in oral language skills, then his or her reading potential would be low, but if students are highly competent in

the oral-aural language skills then there is the potential to become highly skilled in reading. He shows that there is a positive correlation between preschool and oral language skills and subsequent achievement in reading. If we apply Stichl's findings to foreign languages learners in Japan, then we cannot expect Japanese students to become competent in reading, which is the focus of their second language learning, because they do not have competency in the oral-aural language skills. The Japanese system is not following the natural order of language acquisition in its teaching of foreign languages.

Of course, many of you present at this conference have studied in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), TESL (Second Language) or TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programs and probably think that this is not any really big revelation. All professional ESL teachers know that oral-aural competency is important. But if we examine the Japanese educational system with Stichl's work and the two stages of language acquisition in mind, we can then begin to understand the necessity that following these two stages have for foreign language acquisition. This also exposes the fallacy that students can be come competent in the second stage without reaching a high level of competency in the first stage.

Examining more closely the foreign language programs in the Japanese educational system, we can see that they are using the same approach to teaching foreign languages as they are in their native language programs: focus on the nonnatural stage and leave the natural stage for the home environment. This is the correct approach for one's native language, but for foreign language learners here, there is no home environment where competency in the natural stage can be gained. Thus, the foreign language programs are attempting to teach literacy first, which is backwards to the natural order of language acquisition, and are almost completely ignoring the first stage.

The Author's Reasoning

I would like to digress a little here and explain to you why this has had such a large impact on my thoughts about teaching English in Japan. Also, it might give some insight into why the Japanese approach to teaching the native language and foreign language are the same.

As mentioned earlier, many of you present are probably graduates of TEFL or TESOL programs. My major, while attending graduate school, was education and during my graduate program I took the option to work on a teaching certificate in elementary education. At that time, for elementary education, language arts was a major part of that program and consisted of a great deal of our course work. The other parts to the program were the on the job training — which is better known as student teaching — and other courses such as teaching science and math.

Language Arts, for those of you who may not have been elementary education majors, are basically the classes where future teachers learn how to teach children the skills and tools needed to decode and manipulate the written word. These classes are where future teachers learn how to teach reading and writing — literacy — to children whose native language is English. Language arts is concerned with the "nonnatural learnings" also known as the secondary stage of native language acquisition.

During the time, which was 20 years ago, and it might be still true today, teachers who were going to teach elementary school English to children, whose mother tongue was English, were trained to teach almost exclusively at the nonnatural stage of language acquisition. The natural, oral-aural stage of development, speaking and listening, was left to children's natural abilities and the home environment, where there should be lots of stimulation and encouragement to help children develop to their fullest potential. This natural stage of learning happens before children enter school. Children usually become quite competent in speaking and listening before they ever set foot in school and would probably attain a very high level of competency at this stage, even if they never attended school. Therefore, when children do enter school, the educational system expects them to be competent in the natural stage and "ready" to begin learning literacy, the nonnatural stage of language. This is easy to understand when we realize that oral language has always flourished and been present in all human groups even before there were schools, while reading and writing have to be taught.

If we examine both the American and Japanese educational systems, we can see that they make a clear cut distinction between these two stages for their native language learners, and consider it the schools' job to teach children the nonnatural stage of literacy. This is not a big new revelation.

It should be added that during my teacher training there were no classes in the "natural learnings" or the primary stage of native language acquisition in the elementary education program. There was no need to teach children to speak. As anybody who has taught at this level knows, the problem is not getting those young children to speak, but getting them to be quiet.

Here it should be said, that since I have an elementary education background, which had focused on teaching literacy, the Japanese educational system's approach to teaching English didn't seem too unreasonable. Actually, it seemed like the right approach to me. This had been the way that we had been taught to teach English to native language learners in elementary school — focus on the nonnatural stage and, basically, ignore the natural stage because that will take care of itself.

For my own benefit, or all of you present will be wondering what my classes are like, I had better say here, that in my university English conversation classes, the focus is on the natural stage, listening and speaking, but in my other classes the focus is on a combination of the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Understanding the Importance of Learning the First Stage First

But you may be wondering why I didn't notice earlier this major flaw in the Japanese educational system's method to teaching foreign languages, which is teaching the nonnatural stage before the natural stage. This was probably due to the fact that I also believed what I had so often heard when speaking with my Japanese colleagues, and not only language teachers but also with engineers, scientists and professors, which was that although students' may not be able to have a simple conversation in their foreign language, they can understand complex technical reports written and can write college-level research papers. The general belief is that because the Japanese school system's focus is on reading and writing in foreign language programs, Japanese students' literacy skills in foreign language such as English are good. This follows with the idea that many Japanese people have that communication is not the object of foreign language learning for the schools.

This idea that literacy is more important than speaking and listening has a historically background from when Japan was a closed country which wanted very little actual contact with foreigners, but hoped to catch up with Western supremacy in technology through foreign books. This idea helped lead to the present day educational system's focus on teaching foreign language literacy skills and ignoring the communication skills. Actually, the reasons for the educational system focusing on the nonnatural stage today are probably three fold.

One: During the Meiji Era most of the catching up with the West technology was done by reading and translating foreign books, not with contact with foreigners. Therefore, translation was all important.

Two: Prior to the push for internationalization many Japanese English teachers were literature majors, not ESL majors and probably felt most comfortable with the translation approach to learning English, as opposed to speaking and listening in English.

Three: Just as I was taught in my language arts classes, teaching the native language and teaching foreign languages are using the same approach of focusing on the nonnatural stages. Maybe this is because the writing system for Japanese is so difficult and takes years of hard work to master. Therefore, Japanese educators feel that this attention at the nonnatural stage should be given to all languages.

But returning to my point, any foreigner who has every proofread any high-level research, or other kinds of academic papers written in English by persons whose English communication (oral-aural) skills are not fully developed knows that reading and writing skills are not at the high level that they are supposed to be. The belief that Japanese students nonnatural skills are high is just unfound. Actually, the skills in the nonnatural stage are very

low. And I did not realize how difficult proficiency in reading and writing is without competency in the natural stage was until I read Sticht's work.

Even saying that, I must admit that I too bought into this idea and believed that writing and reading skills were separate and did not have to be directly related to how good a person's oral-aural skills were. That was until reading The Schools We Need by Hirsch. Although Hirsch and Sticht both only wrote about native language acquisition, it was only logical to realize that these stages must also apply to nonnative language learners. This is when I realized how the Japan's educational system's teaching of reading and writing is directly opposite to the natural stages of language acquisition. And that if the natural stages are not followed then, Japanese students could never achieve any real level of fluency or competency in either stage. I am sure that Japanese students' lack of any significant progress in their long-studied foreign languages only adds to their resentment and frustration because they have had to endure all those years of boring required English classes without achieving any proficiency in the language.

Actually, before reading Sticht's and Hirsch's work, I too had believed that the reverse was possibly and that my Japanese students' reading and writing (actually mostly translating) skills could quickly transfer to good speaking and listening skills.

On a personal level, in my university conversational English classes that I teach, this reverse transfer never really happens. For many years I have been happily teaching and not questioning the Japanese system's approach of focusing on the nonnatural stage and ignoring the natural stage. Believing that this reverse transfer was possible, I made the usually excuses why my teaching was not greatly improving students' conversational skills such as: maybe they just needed a little more time than the once-a-week, ninety minute class, or it might be possible if the classes were smaller than the forty to fifty university students, or students come to college only to socialize not to study, et cetera. Actually, as I said before, teaching literacy at school seemed very correct to the elementary school teacher in me.

Maybe though, you are like I was and believed that there can be a reverse transfer of skills from the nonnatural to the natural stages. Since I have started my reading into this area, I cannot find any research that supports this reverse transfer although I have witnessed it in a few very motivated students. But upon questioning these students about their foreign language proficiency usually the students have made their own first stage, English language environment and work very hard at acquiring the first stage skills by attending private conversation classes or by having foreigner friends. This supports what I have read; most research says that there is a need for competency at the natural stage before the nonnatural stage can be successfully developed.

For example, if we examine a reported in The psychology of reading by E.J. Gibson and H. Levin, we can draw an interesting correlation between how far native speakers and foreign language learners can progress in their literacy skills without first gaining competency in the first stage of language acquisition. Gibson and Levin's report deals with deaf children. They reported that "deaf students seem to reach a plateau at fourth-grade reading skill, even though they may stay in school until they are 19 or 20 years old. This contrasts with the typical high school graduate of 18 years who reads, by definition, at the twelfth-grade level. (p. 501)" If a fourth-grade reading skill is the average level that can be reached for native language learners who are disadvantaged in their hearing skills, but are completely submerged in an English environment, what are the implications of this study for foreign language learners, who because of the educational system are both hearing and speaking disadvantaged. It would seem that if they reached a first- or second-grade level in their reading and writing skills then they are doing exceptionally well. This gives us some food for thought because Gibson and Levin's report does not support that before mentioned idea that Japanese students can read and write quite well in English, but are just lacking in the listening and speaking skills. Even if they can attain a fourth-grade level of competency, which is probably extremely difficult, this is not very good. What Gibson and Levin reported supports the fact that native language acquisition has stages and they must be followed. The implications are clear for foreign language learners. They too must follow the natural order of language acquisition if they hope to become fluent and literate in a foreign language.

The Two Stages in More Detail

Let me go back now and explain in a little more detail the two stages of native language acquisition. This distinction between the natural and nonnatural learnings stages of language acquisition is very evident if we look at how children learn. Normal human babies are born with the abilities to speak and hear. Children's natural learnings don't just include speaking and listening but also include other things like the manipulation of objects and social relations. These can be considered natural because they are not culture-specific but can be universally found in every human group. These learnings are developed and practiced daily in a healthy home environment, usually giving children a good foundation, even a strong competency in these skills by the time they enter the school system.

Hirsch says that:

> "The most stunning example (of natural learnings) is the learning of the mother tongue. While this attainment is an immense intellectual feat requiring a great deal of time and effort, it is a feat that all normal children achieve in the natural course of things, in their own good time. Advantaged toddlers, with lots of encouragement and stimulation from their parents, usually become more proficient in language than disadvantaged children, showing that 'artificial' interventions are important even in this universal learning. Nonetheless, the basic process is natural. Scientific opinion has converged on the view that native-language learning is mediated by dedicated locations in the brain, and is as inherent as physical development." (The Schools We Need, p. 220)

The next stage, the nonnatural stage, which consists of such things such as multiplication, division, typing, among other things, and literacy, is usually learned in school. These types of learnings are not universal and are considered more of a culture-specific process, which must be taught and cannot be left up to a child's natural abilities. To more clearly see the distinction between the two in past cultures of the world, oral language is universal but alphabetic literacy is rare. Some cultures today do not possess a written alphabet. Even America's Indian tribes, which have a very rich oral tradition, never developed a written alphabet.

There are lots of overlapping of these two stages: for example, there are many preschool intervention programs, that focus on developing children's oral language skills, and some students enter school already reading. At school, new vocabulary is taught, and children are practicing speaking and listening at school all day. But from what is generally considered the start of compulsory education, there is a very clear distinction between the two stages and the schools' focus is on the nonnatural stage, especially for native language learning.

Even with the many different types of overlapping and various levels of intelligence, generally speaking, children are already competent in the natural stage of their native language before they enter school. If you don't believe this then go and have a conversation in Japanese with a five- or six-year-old Japanese child and you will find out how much better their grasp of the natural stage of their native language is than many of us foreign language speakers of Japanese. For me, it is always shocking and more than a little depressing when one of my Japanese friend's five-year-old children corrects my Japanese. But what we have to consider is that from birth all day long children are practicing the natural learnings of this, as Hirsch called it, immense intellectual feat in their home environment and have to communicate in their native language. Whereas generally, people like myself who are learning Japanese as a foreign language do not have this kind of home environment in which they can totally immerse themselves in this intellectual feat of learning a language. Instead, we tend to take a few hours a week of Japanese classes and practice what we have learned in local drinking and pickup establishments and we surround ourselves with foreigners and Japanese who can speak English even though we live in the foreign land. All this is helpful to gain a minimum proficiency in the foreign language, but does not provide the kind of natural environment that is really necessary for true fluency in the foreign language. For anyone to even think about mastering the nonnatural stage of Japanese, the writing system which includes the Chinese *kanji* characters, and the *katakana* and *hiragana* syllabaries along with *romaji*, the western alphabet is mind boggling. Few foreign language learners of Japanese

attempted to learn Japanese at the nonnatural stage and then proceed on to the natural stage. But this is the way English is taught to Japanese students in their foreign language classes.

Of course, there is always the question: If speaking and listening are natural, why doesn't fluency in one's native language, also mean oral fluency can easily be achieved in all other languages? It almost seems natural to think that the natural language acquisition in one's mother tongue should easily transfer into at least some sort of competency in other foreign languages. But mastery of one intellectual skill does not automatically transfer into mastery of another, because of the domain-specific knowledge needed. Sometimes, though, there are some skill carryovers from the native language to another language. But for two languages like English and Japanese, where the sounds, written characters and grammar are so completely different, there is not a lot of language skill transfer that the learner can use to help in the learning the new language.

Having said this, it would appear that learning both the natural and nonnatural stages of a foreign language should both be considered learning at the nonnatural stage. This is not the case either. The listening and speaking stage of a foreign language should always be considered learning at the natural stage, because even though it is extremely difficult, it can be done naturally. If you have the motivation and give it the effort that every child gives to learning their mother tongue, you can become quite proficient in the speaking and listening stage of a foreign language without ever going to school.

Conclusion

Now going back to a very important point for my paper, which is that without the natural stage of language acquisition being well developed, foreign language learners will have great difficulty with the nonnatural process of literacy.

In his book, Hirsch, refers to the nonnatural stage as secondary learnings and states that, "These secondary leanings do not fit the naturalistic scheme of automatic development. It is quite misleading to think of them on the analogy of an acorn developing into an oak. The learnings do not develop at all unless they are taught." He goes on to say, that, "Children's readiness for the secondary processes is not a matter of natural development but of *prior relevant learning*. Learning builds on learning. (The Schools We Need, p. 223) "

To reiterate this in a little different way, Hirsch is saying that the secondary stage must be taught and will not develop naturally. More importantly, he says that secondary stage definitely needs the first stage of language development to be able to progress on and become competent in the second stage. As you can't have the oak tree before the acorn, you can't have literary before there is a good deal of competency in speaking and listening.

This brings me back to the importance that these stages of native language acquisition have for foreign language learning.

If we examine how English as a foreign language is taught in Japan, we see that the Japanese educational system has been focusing on the teaching of the nonnatural stage of mostly reading and some writing, using the translation method. The problem with this is that for the foreign language there is no home environment where the immense intellectual feat of learning the natural stage can take place. In Japan, the natural stage for language acquisition is being ignored and students are jumping feet first into the nonnatural stage, which to use another analogy is putting the cart before the horse.

The more I read about Thomas G. Sticht's work, the more I realize how this backwards approach was not at all helping students.

"[Sticht] He found that reading ability in nondeaf children cannot exceed their listening ability....Sticht showed that for most children, by seventh grade the ability to read with speed and comprehension and the ability to listen had become identical. Oral-aural communication skills are primary, and they place a definite limit on a person's reading-writing skills." Therefore, "the comprehension of written language cannot exceed the comprehension of oral language, that oral speech is the foundation of written speech. If children's oral-aural vocabulary and their oral-aural comprehension abilities are not well developed, neither will their reading abilities be. But if children's oral-aural communication abilities are well developed, the only barrier to their becoming good readers is lack of fluency and accuracy in their decoding skills...." He continues on to say that "no effort should be spared to enhance

those foundational oral-aural skills as a prerequisite for further literacy skills. (Hirsch, p. 147)"

If we consider this and the backwards Japanese educational approach to second language acquisition, where reading and writing are focused on and listening and speaking are left up to a few special class meetings with a foreign teacher, then we can understand why it is almost impossible for Japanese students to become competent in English at either the natural or nonnatural stage. They just do not have the primary skills needed to build on. If Sticht is correct and reading skill cannot exceed listening skill then for English language learners in Japan all the translation and grammar exercise they have will not help gain any level of competency in reading and writing because they do not have any listening skills.

The conclusion to my paper is that foreign language acquisition must follow the same stages as does the native language. Foreign language teaching, as in the Japanese system, cannot go directly to the nonnatural stage skipping over the natural stage because here there is no home environment where children can become competent in the natural stage of the foreign language. Just as for children whose native language oral-aural skills are not up to par when they enter school, Japanese children will also be disadvantaged. Without the prerequisite oral-aural skills there can never be any kind of competency in the nonnatural stage.

Before when the only goal for students learning English was to pass so they could proceed on to the next rung in climb up their education the ladder, then the backwards approach was acceptable. But now, when students are expected to use English in the real world this approach has no redeeming merits and is completely unacceptable. It may actually be doing students a grave injustice by wasting their time and making them hate English because of their lack of progress in it. Therefore, for foreign languages, schools must take the place of the home environment and make sure that learners are competent at this stage before proceeding on to teaching the skills for the literacy stage of development.

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